

SOME BIBLICAL ARGUMENTS USED BY OPENNESS THEOLOGY

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Those promoting openness theology use many arguments to support their claim. These arguments come from philosophy, biblical exegesis, theology, and practical consequences. The most important arguments for Christians will be those coming from the Bible itself. John Sanders' *The God Who Risks*¹ provides about a hundred pages of arguments from the Old Testament and the New Testament. This article will deal with three of the most important of these arguments.

God's Reactions

In the Bible, especially in the Old Testament, God is said to react to what people on earth do. When they obey him, he is pleased. When they disobey, he is angry. Sometimes God seems so frustrated that he declares he will start anew—and he actually did that in the days of Noah. The Bible says, “The LORD was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain.”² When people sin, he declares he will punish them. But when they repent, he changes that pronouncement and sends blessings instead. When the Israelites rebelled near Mt. Sinai, God declared that he would wipe them out and make a great nation from the descendents of Moses. However, Moses prayed to God, and God said that he heard Moses' prayer, and would not wipe the Israelites out after all.³ God told Jonah he would destroy the wicked people of Nineveh, but when Jonah relayed that message and they repented, God changed his decree against them and let them live.⁴

Likewise, in the New Testament God reacts to what people do. When Christians sin they “grieve the Holy Spirit.”⁵ When a sinner repents the angels rejoice, and God is pictured as the happy father thrilled by the return of his wayward son.⁶ Of course, it is clear that God's wrath is against sinners, but when they repent and believe, he changes that wrath into love and acceptance.

Openness theologians point to passages such as these, and ask, how can all these reactions of God to what people do be ignored? Doesn't it seem obvious that God is affected by what we do? Can't we make him happy, or sad? Can't we change his plans by changing ourselves? This is what they mean by the term “openness”; God is “open” to us. The relationship they picture is not one-sided, but mutually affective. God wants to love us, and be loved by us. But our love must be freely given, not predetermined or caused by him. He “opens” himself up to us, so that we can, by our own free decision, love him and obey him. This love makes him happy. When we, again in our own freedom, choose not to love him, it saddens him. This is the great “project” of God—the great “risk” he takes.

Contrary to this modern openness theology, orthodox theologians, and all major creeds of the church, have taught that God is unchangeable, eternal, infinite, and is perfectly self-sufficient. God dwells in eternal bliss, and cannot be harmed by us. For example, theologian Charles Hodge puts it this way:

The immutability of God is intimately connected with his immensity and eternity, and is frequently included with them in the Scriptural statements concerning his nature. Thus, when it is said, He is the First and the Last, the Alpha and Omega, the same yesterday, today, and forever; or when in contrast with the ever changing and perishing world, it is said, "They shall be changed, but thou art the same," it is not his eternity more than his immutability that is brought into view. As an infinite and absolute Being, self-existent and absolutely independent, God is exalted above all the causes of and even above the possibility of change. Infinite space and infinite duration cannot change. They must ever be what they are. So God is absolutely immutable in his essence and attributes. He can neither increase nor decrease. He is subject to no process of development, or of self-evolution. His knowledge and power can never be greater or less. He can never be wiser or holier, or more righteous or more merciful than He ever has been and ever must be. He is no less immutable in his plans and purposes. Infinite in wisdom, there can be no error in their conception; infinite in power, there can be no failure in their accomplishment.⁷

The Bible concurs in this view of God. His plans and purposes are carried out exactly, and God knows in advance what he will do and what the results will be.

- "The plans of the Lord stand firm forever, the purposes of his heart through all generations" (Ps 33:11).
- "Surely, as I have planned, so it will be, and as I have purposed, so it will stand" (Isa 14:24).
- "I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me. I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please" (Isa 46:9-10).

The passages quoted by openness theologians describe the outward and observable actions of God's providence, and are written in the popular, vernacular style used by the biblical authors. These passages, like many others, employ figures of speech called anthropomorphisms and anthropopathisms. An anthropomorphism is a figure of speech in which God is spoken of as having human body parts or appearance—"the eyes of the Lord," "the ears of the Lord," "the Lord's mighty arm." An anthropopathism is a figure of speech in which God is spoken of as having human feelings or emotions—these are the passages quoted by the openness theologians.⁸ This style of writing makes the Bible narratives more understandable and vivid to the reader.

A helpful illustration of this principle is found in the story of the Lord and two angels visiting Abraham, before they went ahead to investigate and then destroy the wicked city of Sodom. The Bible tells us what the Lord told Abraham: "Then the LORD said, 'The outcry

against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me. If not, I will know.”⁹ This statement by the Lord vividly demonstrated to Abraham that the time for the judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah had come. Abraham knew that those cities could not stand up to the Lord’s “inspection,” and he pleaded for Lot and his family, who lived there. What would an openness theologian make of this statement? To be consistent, he would have to say that the Lord did not know for sure if Sodom and Gomorrah were as wicked as he had heard they were. The Lord actually had to travel to the cities to see for himself. This seems like an excellent illustration of a “self-imposed limitation” on God’s knowledge. However, the openness theologians do not believe this. They say that God has perfect knowledge of the past and the present, it is only the future that he does not know.¹⁰ Likewise, they agree that God is everywhere in the present, and does not need to move about to know what is going on. So they agree that this passage is anthropomorphic—God pictured himself to Abraham, and to us, with human limitations in order to make the situation more accessible and vivid. He actually had no such limitations.

By interpreting these anthropomorphic and anthropopathic passages with excessive literalism, openness theologians make the Bible teach a type of God that is inconsistent with what is specifically said about him in other passages—that he is ignorant of the future, is changeable, and that his happiness is held hostage by his creatures. This is poor exegesis, and produces poor theology.

God’s Changing His Mind

Several of the passages mentioned in the previous section seem to specifically say that God changed his mind. These passages deserve special consideration, since they seem to strongly support the openness position.

In a few places in the Bible it says “God repented” (KJV) or “God relented” (NIV).¹¹ These passages must be interpreted in harmony with the rest of Scripture. This is done by recognizing their literary character, again, the use of anthropopathism.¹² It seems to us, from our perspective, that God changed his mind. And if God were human, we could imagine him actually changing his mind. However, as God, his mind did not change; he had planned this course of action from the beginning. Rather, what actually changed was his outward or observable providence toward his creatures, and this change was based on a change in the creatures.¹³ When the person changed from good to bad, God’s attitude and outward providence changed accordingly. When the person changed from bad to good, his outward providence likewise changed in keeping with the new situation. God’s character and plan remained constant throughout the process. Actually, God would be changing his character if his outward providence did not adjust to a change in the situation.¹⁴

Jesus, The Image of God

Jesus said, “If you have seen me, you have seen the Father.”¹⁵ If we want to know what God is like, we need to look at Jesus Christ, who is the “image of the invisible God.”¹⁶ When we

look at Jesus, what do we see? Do we see an “impassible” figure, one who is untouched by what we say or do? Do we see an “unchangeable” person, one who is always calm, reposed, and emotionally at rest? Quite the contrary! The Jesus presented in the Gospels is a man full of vigor and emotion, a man who loves, who grieves, who is anxious, who rejoices. Jesus is the God-man, yet he is vulnerable to us. People can hurt Jesus, they can bring him to sorrow, to anger, to compassion, to love.

If Jesus was so “open” to us when revealed on the earth, the argument goes, and if he is the exact image of God the Father, then it is obvious that God the Father has a similar character. He is not impassive and unchangeable, untouched by us. He too feels, loves, and experiences the varying emotions displayed by Jesus.

Orthodox Christian theologians have from the beginning recognized the emotions and reactions of Jesus Christ, as pictured in the Gospels. An excellent exposition of these passages was written by Benjamin B. Warfield in 1912.¹⁷ But we do not say that God experiences these emotions and changes. How is this so? The answer lies in the unique person of Jesus Christ. He alone of the Trinity became man, and continues to be God and man in one person forever. The actions, thoughts, and emotions of Jesus pictured in the Gospels are those of a man, a human being. Jesus suffered in his humanity, not in his deity. It is sloppy theology to attribute the human aspects of Jesus’ life to God.

What then did Jesus reveal of God? The answer lies in his moral life and in his teachings. Theologians refer to these as the relative or the communicable attributes of God—for example, his wisdom, holiness, goodness, and truth. These are attributes that can be shared to some extent with his creatures. The perfect righteousness of Jesus was the righteousness of God shown in a human life. Jesus’ teachings were directly from his Father—they were the words of God. In these aspects of Jesus’ life he perfectly represented his Father.

Actually, the openness view of God is logically false as well, because it proves too much. If the man Jesus Christ shows the changeableness and “openness” of God, then his other human features should as well. Jesus was poor; is God poor? Jesus was hungry; is God ever hungry? Jesus was thirsty; is God ever thirsty? Jesus was weary with the journey, and needed to rest. Is he who keeps Israel ever tired or weary? Jesus was tempted to sin; is God ever tempted to sin? The Bible clearly answers all these questions, “No!” God owns all things, he has no need of food or drink, he never sleeps or is weary, he cannot be tempted to sin.¹⁸

Oftentimes we try to imitate or mimic a famous person. We can talk or move like he does, and people will laugh to see it. But the part of the person we are imitating is only accidental. We imitate about him something that is easy to imitate. But we cannot imitate that which made him famous in the first place. That was a peculiar gift he had; if we had that gift, we would be famous ourselves. For example, they say that J. Gresham Machen, the famous New Testament scholar, would teach Greek sometimes with a chalk eraser on his head. I can imitate Machen in my Greek classes by putting an eraser on my head. But that does not make me like Machen—to do that I would have to equal him in scholarship—no easy thing! This same principle applies to comparing Jesus and God. The ways that Jesus was like God were ways that humanity could be like God; they were those properties that a human could express. The human

Jesus could not imitate those aspects of God that God does not share with humanity. Humanity itself is limited and created, and can never be like God in those ways that are unique to God. These properties are referred to as his absolute or incommunicable attributes, and include God's simplicity, immensity, and eternity. The human nature of Jesus never did and never could possess those attributes; only his divine nature possesses them. It is improper to attribute the characteristics of Jesus' human nature to his divine nature, and thus to the other members of the Trinity. But that is the error made by this openness argument.

Conclusion

In an interview with his publisher, John Sanders declared that the traditional view of God's providence is "confused."¹⁹ It did not give him a satisfactory explanation of various tragedies that had come upon his family. Sanders rejected the idea advanced by many of his friends, that God had a good purpose in all these events: "To be honest, it didn't sit well with me." He then set off on his journey to rethink the whole issue of God's providence. He concluded that bad things happen, but that God does not want those things to happen. This, he says, allows for true "lament." God is disappointed too, and he weeps with us.²⁰

It seems that Sanders, and the other openness theologians, are placing us and our desires on a higher level than the Bible does. God's glory, not our happiness, is God's primary goal, and should be our primary goal as well. This model of a reduced God may be appealing to self-important humans, but in the end it not only is unscriptural, but fails to provide a God "who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will."²¹

¹ John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998) 39-139. See my review of this book in this issue of the *WRS Journal*.

² Gen 6:6-7.

³ Exod 32:10-14.

⁴ Jonah 3.

⁵ Eph 4:30.

⁶ Luke 15:7, 20-24.

⁷ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (1871; reprinted: London: James Clarke & Co. Ltd., 1960), 1:390. See also the good discussion in Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr. (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 1992), 1:204-206.

⁸ For an excellent and thorough listing and cataloging of the many anthropomorphisms and anthropopathisms of the Bible, along with some other comparisons of God to animals, inanimate objects, and other concepts, see the extensive section "Anthropopatheia, or Condescension: The Ascribing of Human Attributes, etc., to God" in E. W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible Explained and Illustrated* (1898; reprinted: Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1968) 871-897.

⁹ Gen 18:20-21.

¹⁰ Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 131.

¹¹ As Gen 6:6-7 (creating man); 1 Sam 15:10-11 (making Saul king); Jer 18:8 (judging a nation which repents); Jonah 3:10 (destroying Nineveh).

¹² "Those passages of Scripture in which God is said to repent, are to be interpreted on the same principle as those in which He is said to ride upon the wings of the wind, or to walk through the earth. These create no difficulty." Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 1:391.

¹³ Sometimes God changed his outward providence toward a person because of a particular spiritual need of the person for sanctification, and a particular opportunity to display his glory and instruct believers. Such was the case of God's changing his favorable providence toward Job, when Job's life had not changed significantly—"ruin him without any reason" (Job 2:3).

¹⁴ For a fuller discussion of God's "changing his mind," see the accompanying article in this issue of the *WRS Journal*, "Divine Repentance: A Word Study," by Timothy Prussic.

¹⁵ John 14:9.

¹⁶ Col 1:15.

¹⁷ "On the Emotional Life of Our Lord," *Biblical and Theological Studies*, by the Faculty of Princeton Theological Seminary; reprinted as Chapter 4 of Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Person and Work of Christ*, ed. Samuel G. Craig (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1970).

¹⁸ E.g., see Ps 50:10, 12; 121:4; Jas 1:13.

¹⁹ "Divine Providence: A Risky Business?" (interview of John Sanders by Rodney Clapp), *Academic Alert: IVP's Book Bulletin for Professors* (Winter 1999) 1-3. All Sanders' statements in this paragraph comes from this interview.

²⁰ For an excellent discussion of the negative consequences of this view in counseling situations, see the accompanying article in this issue of the *WRS Journal*, Eric S. Lasch, "Some Practical Consequences of Openness Theology."

²¹ Eph 1:11.